

# CALIFORNIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

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## **State Board of Education Q & A** **Ensuring Disabled Students' Access to the California High School Exit Exam**

***At its November 2001 meeting, the State Board of Education adopted regulations to ensure high school students with disabilities are granted necessary and allowable accommodations to take the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). At its December 5, 2001, meeting, the State Board adopted a waiver policy on modifications to the exit exam. The following Q&A addresses issues surrounding the purpose of the exit exam, the allowable accommodations and modifications to be granted to disabled students taking the exam, and the adopted waiver policy.***

*Q1) Why are students with disabilities required to take the California High School Exit Exam?*

- A) Under current law, all high school students must pass the exit exam as a condition of graduation, starting with the class of 2004 (under the provisions of AB 1609, recently signed into law, the State Board has the authority to delay the exit exam consequence date pending further review of the test).

*Q2) What is the purpose in giving the exit exam to all high school students?*

- A) The exit exam consists of English-language arts and math tests that are designed to assess whether high school students have mastered a basic set of skills to participate fully in civic life and to succeed in the workplace. Simply put, the exit exam measures reading comprehension and computational skills, among other skills. The idea that the state should not determine whether high school students have learned to read and to add, subtract, multiply and divide, defeats the fundamental purpose of the exit exam.

*Q3) Isn't the State Board being unfair to those disabled students whose specific disability does not allow them to learn to read or compute?*

- A) The Board recognizes and understands that some students have specific disabilities that affect their ability to learn to read or their ability to compute—and yet are able to complete high school-level coursework with the use of a reader or calculator. As a result, the Board has directed that a policy be developed that would waive the exam in specific cases. ***The purpose of the waiver is clear: to permit those students who are otherwise qualified but do not have the opportunity to learn to read or perform math computations because of a disability to receive a diploma.***

*Q4) But hasn't the State Board, through its adopted regulations on accommodations to the exit exam, essentially limited disabled students' chances to earn a high school diploma?*

- A) No. On the contrary, the State Board took the action to help students with disabilities achieve the dream of every high school student—to earn a diploma. State law provides that students with exceptional needs be given the exit exam with “accommodations” that are appropriate and necessary. There are a number of allowable accommodations under the State Board’s regulations. They include, but are not limited to, the following:
- 1) Presentation accommodations, such as large print versions or Braille transcriptions;
  - 2) Response accommodations, such as responses made with a mechanical or electronic device used solely to record a student’s answer;
  - 3) Scheduling accommodations, such as more frequent breaks during the regularly scheduled test session;
  - 4) Setting accommodations, such as special furniture or lighting, or a separate, secured room.

*Q5) But some reports said students with disabilities would not get extra time to take the exit exam. Is that true or false?*

- A) That is false. The exit exam is an un-timed test, so disabled students—as all students—can take all the time they need to complete the exam.

*Q6) Federal law allows students with disabilities to have special instructional accommodations that are outlined in an “individualized education program” or IEP. Is it true that the adopted regulations disallow most of these accommodations when a disabled student takes the exit exam?*

- A) That is false. The regulations outline only two accommodations or modifications that are not allowed because their use would fundamentally alter what the test is seeking to measure, that is, reading comprehension and computational skills. The only two accommodations specifically disallowed are calculators on the math portion of the exit exam, and audio or oral presentations of the English-language arts portion of the test.

*Q7) But if a disabled student's IEP allows calculators and readers, why wouldn't those accommodations be allowed on the exit exam?*

- A) They can be allowed. Under the proposed waiver policy, a local education agency may submit a request on behalf of a student with disabilities to the California Department of Education with evidence that, among other things: 1) the student is successfully taking high-school level coursework and, 2) has taken the exit exam with whatever modifications are deemed necessary—including a reader or calculator—and has achieved a score equivalent to a passing score on the exit exam. (The accommodations or modifications must already be included in a student’s IEP).

*Q8) When will this waiver policy be in effect?*

- A) The State Board adopted the waiver policy at its December 5, 2001 meeting and is therefore in effect for the March 2002 administration of the CAHSEE.

*Q9) Is the State Board pursuing any legislative solution to these issues?*

- A) Yes. The State Board has previously stated its intent to explore with the Legislature whether there are statutory options that would allow the award of a high school diploma to students whose disabilities cannot be accommodated in taking the exit exam without fundamentally altering the test.